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ABSTRACT

Fifteen years after the release of the landmark education report, "A Nation at Risk," a number of the nation's most prominent education reformers, business leaders, and policymakers met at an event sponsored by the Center for Education Reform, Empower America, the Heritage Foundation, and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. To discuss the state of U.S. education and recommend far-reaching reforms. This manifesto results from that meeting and asserts that the risk poised by inadequate education has changed. The United States does not face imminent danger of economic decline or technological inferiority, but the state of children's education is still very far from what it should be. Evidence suggests that, compared to the rest of the industrialized world, students lag seriously in subjects vital to the country's future. A dual school system, separate and unequal, is being created, almost 50 years after it was declared unconstitutional. Equal educational opportunity is the next great civil rights issue. By this is meant the true equality that comes from providing every child with a first-rate elementary and secondary education. The main renewal strategies should be the implementation of standards, assessments, and accountability, and the acceptance of pluralism, competition, and choice. Toward these aims, 10 changes are proposed for the 21st century: (1) solid national academic standards and voluntary standards-based assessments; (2) school choice and the removal of school assignment based on home address; (3) strong charter school laws; (4) an increase in the supply of excellent schools; (5) rejection of classroom methods that have been proven not to work and programs parents do not want; (6) improved teacher/subject content knowledge; (7) alternative certification of teachers; (8) high pay for great educators and no pay for incompetents; (9) emphasis on classroom instruction and funding for instruction; and (10) parent participation and the involvement of other caring adults. A list of the signatories of the manifesto is attached. (SLD)

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ED 422 455

A Nation *Still* At Risk

An Education Manifesto

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April 30, 1998

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On April 3, 1998 — fifteen years after the release of the landmark education report, A Nation at Risk – a number of the nation's most prominent education reformers, business leaders and policymakers met at an event sponsored by The Center for Education Reform, Empower America, the Heritage Foundation and the Thomas B Fordham Foundation. The purpose was to discuss the state of American education and recommend far-reaching reforms. The following manifesto results from that meeting.

A Nation Still At Risk

Fifteen years ago this month, the National Commission on Excellence in Education declared the United States a nation at risk. That distinguished citizens' panel admonished the American people that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people." That stark warning was heard across the land.

A decade and a half later, the risk posed by inadequate education has changed. Our nation today does not face imminent danger of economic decline or technological inferiority. Much about America is flourishing, at least for now, at least for a lot of people. Yet the state of our children's education is still far, very far, from what it ought to be. Unfortunately, the economic boom times have made many Americans indifferent to poor educational achievement. Too many express indifference, apathy, a shrug of the shoulders. Despite continuing indicators of inadequacy, and the risk that this poses to our future well being, much of the public shrugs and says, "Whatever."

The data are compelling. We learned just last month that American 12th graders scored near the bottom on the recent Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS): U.S. students placed 19th out of 21 nations in math and 16th out of 21 in science. Our advanced students did even worse, scoring dead last in physics. This evidence suggests that, compared to the rest of the industrialized world, our students lag seriously in critical subjects vital to our future. That's a national shame.

Today's high school seniors had not even started school when the Excellence Commission's report was released. A whole generation of young Americans has passed through the education system in the years since. But many have passed through without learning what is needed. Since 1983, over 10 million Americans have reached the 12th grade not even having learned to read at a basic level. Over 20 million have reached their senior year unable to do basic math. Almost 25 million have reached 12th grade not knowing the essentials of U.S. history. And those are the young people who complete their senior year. In the same period, over 6 million Americans dropped out of high school altogether. The numbers are even bleaker in minority communities. In 1996, 13% of all blacks aged 16-to-24 were not in school and did not hold a diploma. Seventeen percent of first-generation Hispanics had dropped out of high school, including a tragic 44% of Hispanic immigrants in this age group. This is another lost generation. For them the risk is grave indeed.

To be sure, there have been gains during this past 15 years, many of them inspired by the Excellence Commission's clarion call. Dropout rates declined and college attendance rose. More high-school students are enrolling in more challenging academic courses. With more students taking more courses and staying in school longer, it is indeed puzzling that student achievement has remained largely flat and that college remediation rates have risen to unprecedented levels.

The Risk Today

Contrary to what so many seem to think, this is no time for complacency. The risk posed to tomorrow's well-being by the sea of educational mediocrity that still engulfs us is acute. Large numbers of students remain at risk. Intellectually and morally, America's educational system is failing far too many people.

Academically, we fall off a cliff somewhere in the middle and upper grades. Internationally, U.S. youngsters hold their own at the elementary level but falter in the middle years and drop far behind in high school. We seem to be the only country in the world whose children fall farther behind the longer they stay in school. That is true of our advanced students and our so-called good schools, as well as those in the middle. Remediation is rampant in college, with some 30% of entering freshmen (including more than half at the sprawling California State University system) in need of remedial courses in reading, writing and mathematics after arriving on campus. Employers report difficulty finding people to hire who have the skills, knowledge, habits, and attitudes they require for technologically sophisticated positions. Silicon Valley entrepreneurs press for higher immigration levels so they can recruit the qualified personnel they need. Though the pay they offer is excellent, the supply of competent U.S.-educated workers is too meager to fill the available jobs.

In the midst of our flourishing economy, we are recreating a dual school system, separate and unequal, almost half a century after it was declared unconstitutional. We face a widening and unacceptable chasm between good schools and bad, between those youngsters who get an adequate education and those who

emerge from school barely able to read and write. Poor and minority children, by and large, go to worse schools, have less expected of them, are taught by less knowledgeable teachers, and have the least power to alter bad situations. Yet it's poor children who most need great schools.

If we continue to sustain this chasm between the educational haves and have-nots, our nation will face cultural, moral, and civic peril. During the past 30 years, we have witnessed a cheapening and coarsening of many facets of our lives. We see it, among other places, in the squalid fare on television and in the movies. Obviously the school is not primarily responsible for this degradation of culture. But we should be able to rely on our schools to counter the worst aspects of popular culture, to fortify students with standards, judgment and character. Trashy American culture has spread worldwide; educational mediocrity has not. Other nations seem better equipped to resist the Hollywood invasion than is the land where Hollywood is located.

Delusion and Indifference

Regrettably, some educators and commentators have responded to the persistence of mediocre performance by engaging in denial, self-delusion, and blame shifting. Instead of acknowledging that there are real and urgent problems, they deny that there are any problems at all. Some have urged complacency, assuring parents in leafy suburbs that their own children are doing fine and urging them to ignore the poor performance of our elite students on international tests. Broad hints are dropped that, if there's a problem, it's confined to other people's children in other communities. Yet when attention is focused on the acute achievement problems of disadvantaged youngsters, many educators seem to think that some boys and girls—especially those from the "other side of the tracks"—just can't be expected to learn much.

Then, of course, there is the fantasy that America's education crisis is a fraud, something invented by enemies of public schools. And there is the worrisome conviction of millions of parents that, whatever may be ailing U.S. education in general, "my kid's school is OK."

Now is no time for complacency. Such illusions and denials endanger the nation's future and the future of today's children. Good education has become absolutely indispensable for economic success, both for individuals and for American society. More so today than in 1983, the young person without a solid education is doomed to a bleak future.

Good education is the great equalizer of American society. Horace Mann termed it the "balance wheel of the social machinery," and that is even more valid now. As we become more of a meritocracy the quality of one's education matters more. That creates both unprecedented opportunities for those who once would have found the door barred—and huge new hurdles for those burdened by inferior education.

America today faces a profound test of its commitment to equal educational opportunity. This is a test of whether we truly intend to educate all our children or merely keep everyone in school for a certain number of years; of whether we will settle for low levels of performance by most youngsters and excellence only from an elite few. Perhaps America can continue to prosper economically so long as only some of its citizens are well educated. But can we be sure of that? Should we settle for so little? What about the wasted human potential and blighted lives of those left behind?

Our nation's democratic institutions and founding principles assume that we would be a people capable of deliberating together. We must decide whether we really care about the debilitating effects of mediocre schooling on the quality of our politics, our popular culture, our economy and our communities, as dumbing-down infiltrates every aspect of society. Are we to be the land of Jefferson and Lincoln or the land of Beavis and Butthead?

The Real Issue is Power

The Excellence Commission had the right diagnosis but was vague—and perhaps a bit naive—as to the cure. The commissioners trusted that good advice would be followed, that the system would somehow fix itself, and that top-down reforms would suffice. They spoke of "reforming our educational system in fundamental ways." But they did not offer a political or structural-change strategy to turn these reforms into reality. They underestimated, too, the resilience of the status quo and the strength of the interests wedded to it. As former commissioner (and Minnesota governor) Albert Quie says, "At that time I had no idea that the system was so reluctant to change."

The problem was not that the Excellence Commission had to content itself with words. (Those are the only tools at our disposal, too.) In fact, its stirring prose performed an important service. No, the problem was that the Commission took the old ground rules for granted. In urging the education system to do more and better, it assumed that the system had the capacity and the will to change.

Alas, this was not true. Power over our education system has been increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few who don't really want things to change, not substantially, not in ways that would really matter. The education system's power brokers responded to the Commission, but only a little. The Commission asked for a yard, and the "stakeholders" gave an inch. Hence much of *A Nation at Risk*'s wise counsel went unheeded, and its sense of urgency has ebbed.

Today we understand that vast institutions don't change just because they should – especially when they enjoy monopolies. They change only when they must, only when their survival demands it. In other parts of American life, stodgy, self-interested monopolies are not tolerated. They have been busted up and alternatives created as we have realized that large bureaucratic structures are inherently inefficient and unproductive. The private sector figured this out decades ago. The countries of the former Soviet empire are grasping it. Even our federal government is trying to "reinvent" itself around principles of competition and choice. President Clinton has declared that "the era of big government is over." It should now be clear to all that the era of the big-government monopoly of public education needs to end as well.

The fortunate among us continue to thrive within and around the existing education system, having learned how to use it, to bend its rules and to sidestep its limitations. The well-to-do and powerful know how to coexist with the system, even to exploit it for the benefit of their children. They supplement it. They move in search of the best it has to offer. They pay for alternatives.

But millions of Americans – mainly the children of the poor and minorities – don't enjoy those options. They are stuck with what "the system" dishes out to them, and all too often they are stuck with the least qualified teachers, the most rigid bureaucratic structures, the fewest choices and the shoddiest quality. Those parents who yearn for something better for their children lack the power to make it happen. They lack the power to shape their own lives and those of their children.

Here is a question for our times: Why aren't we as outraged about this denial of Americans' educational rights as we once were about outright racial segregation?

The Next Civil Rights Frontier

Equal educational opportunity is the next great civil-rights issue. We refer to the true equality of opportunity that results from providing every child with a first-rate primary and secondary education, and to the development of human potential that comes from meeting intellectual, social and spiritual challenges. The educational gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students are huge, handicapping poor children in their pursuit of higher education, good jobs and a better life.

In today's schools, far too many disadvantaged and minority students are not being challenged. Far too many are left to fend for themselves when they need instruction and direction from highly qualified teachers. Far too many are passed from grade to grade, left to sink or swim. Far too many are advanced without even learning to read, though proven methods of teaching reading are now well-known. They are given shoddy imitations of real academic content, today's equivalent of Jim Crow math and back-of-the-bus science. When so little is expected and so little is done, such children are victims of failed public policy.

John Gardner asked in 1967 whether Americans "can be equal and excellent, too?" Three decades later, we have failed to answer that question with a "yes." We have some excellent schools – we obviously know how to create them – and yet we offer an excellent education only to some children. And that bleak truth is joined to another: only some families have the power to shape their children's education.

This brings us to a fundamental if perhaps unpleasant reality: as a general rule, only those children whose parents have power end up with an excellent education.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education believed that this reality could be altered by asking the system to change. Today we know better. It can only be altered by shifting power away from the system.

That is why education has become a civil-rights issue. A "right," after all, is not something you beg the system for. If the system gets to decide whether you will receive it or not, it's not a right. It's only a right when it belongs to you and you have the power to exercise it as you see fit. When you are your own power broker.

Inside the Classroom

Fortunately, we know what works when it comes to good education. We know how to teach children to read. We know what a well-trained teacher does. We know how an outstanding principal leads. We know how to run outstanding schools. We have plenty of examples, including schools that succeed with extremely disadvantaged youngsters.

Immanuel Kant said, "the actual proves the possible." If it can happen in five schools, it can happen in five thousand. This truly is not rocket science. Nor is it a mystery. What is mysterious is why we continue to do what doesn't work. Why we continue to do palpable harm to our children.

Let us be clear: all schools should not be identical. There are healthy disagreements and legitimate differences on priorities. Some teachers like multi-age grouping. Others prefer traditional age-grades. Some parents want their children to sit quietly in rows while others want them to engage in hands-on "experiential learning." So be it. Ours is a big, diverse country. But with all its diversity, we should agree at least to do no harm, to recognize that some practices have been validated while others have not. People's taste in houses varies, too, yet all residences must comply with the fire code. And – while differing in design and size and amenities – all provide shelter, warmth, and protection. In other words: all provide the basics.

Guiding Principles

A) Public education – that is, the public's responsibility for the education of the rising generation – is one of the great strengths of American democracy. Note, however, that public education may be delivered and managed in a variety of ways. We do not equate public education with a standardized and hierarchical government bureaucracy, heavy on the regulation of inputs and processes and staffed exclusively by government employees. Today's public school, properly construed, is any school that is open to the public, paid for by the public, and accountable to public authorities for its results.

B) The central issues today have to do with excellence for all our children, with high standards for all teachers and schools, with options for all families and educators, and with the effectiveness of the system as a whole. What should disturb us most about the latest international results is not that other countries' best students outstrip our best; it is that other countries have done far better at producing both excellence and equity than has the United States.

C) A vast transfer of power is needed from producers to consumers. When it comes to education reform, the Port Huron Statement's formulation was apt: Power to the people. There must be an end to paternalism; the one-size-fits-all structure; and the condescending, government-knows-best attitude. Every family must have the opportunity to choose where its children go to school.

D) To exercise their power wisely and make good decisions on behalf of their children, education's consumers must be well-informed about school quality, teacher qualifications, and much else, including, above all, the performance of their own children vis-a-vis high standards of academic achievement.

Strategies for Change

We urge two main renewal strategies, working in tandem:

I. Standards, assessments and accountability. Every student, school and district must be expected to meet high standards of learning. Parents must be fully informed about the progress of their child and their child's school. District and state officials must reward success and have the capacity – and the obligation – to intervene in cases of failure.

II. Pluralism, competition and choice. We must be as open to alternatives in the delivery of education as we are firm about the knowledge and skills being delivered. Families and communities have different tastes and priorities, and educators have different strengths and passions. It is madness to continue acting as if one school model fits every situation – and it is a sin to make a child attend a bad school if there's a better one across the street.

Ten Break-Through Changes for the 21st Century

1. America needs solid national academic standards and (voluntary) standards-based assessments, shielded from government control, and independent of partisan politics, interest groups, and fads. (A strengthened National Assessment Governing Board would be the best way to accomplish this.) These should accompany – and complement – states' own challenging standards and tough accountability systems.

2. In a free society, people must have the power to shape the decisions that affect their lives and the lives of their children. No decision is more important than where and how one is educated. At minimum, every American child must have the right to attend the (redefined) public school of his choice. Abolish school assignments based on home addresses. And let public dollars to which they are entitled follow individual children to the schools they select. Most signers of this manifesto also believe strongly that this range of choices – especially for poor families – should include private and parochial schools as well as public schools of every description. But even those not ready to take that step – or awaiting a clearer resolution of its constitutionality – are united in their conviction that the present authoritarian system – we choose our words carefully – must go.

3. Every state needs a strong-charter school law, the kind that confers true freedom and flexibility on individual schools, that provides every charter school with adequate resources, and that holds it strictly accountable for its results.

4. More school choice must be accompanied by more choices worth making. America needs to enlarge its *supply* of excellent schools. One way to do that is to welcome many more players into public education. Charter schools are not the whole story. We should also harness the ingenuity of private enterprise, of community organizations, of "private practice" teachers and other such education providers. Schools must be free to contract with such providers for services.

5. Schools must not harm their pupils. They must eschew classroom methods that have been proven not to work. They must not force children into programs that their parents do not want. (Many parents, for example, have serious misgivings about bilingual education as commonly practiced.)

6. Every child has the right to be taught by teachers who know their subjects well. It is educational malpractice that a third of high school math teachers and two-fifths of science teachers neither majored nor minored in these subjects while in college. Nobody should be employed anywhere as a teacher who does not first pass a rigorous test of subject-matter knowledge – and who cannot demonstrate their prowess in conveying what they know to children.

7. One good way to boost the number of knowledgeable teachers is to throw open the classroom door to men and women who are well-educated but have not gone through programs of "teacher education." A NASA scientist, IBM statistician or former state governor may not be traditionally "certified" to teach and yet may have a great deal to offer students. A retired military officer may make a gem of a middle-school principal. Today, Albert Einstein would not be able to teach physics in America's public school classrooms. That is ridiculous. Alternative certification in all its variety should be welcomed, and for schools that are truly held accountable for results, certification should be abolished altogether. Colleges of education must lose their monopoly and compete in the marketplace; if what they offer is valuable, they will thrive.

8. High pay for great educators – and no pay for incompetents. It is said that teaching in and leading schools doesn't pay enough to attract a sufficient number of well-educated, and enterprising people into these vital roles. We agree. But the solution isn't across-the-board raises. The solution is sharply higher salaries for great educators – and no jobs at all for those who cannot do the job well. Why should the principal of a failing school retain a paycheck? Why shouldn't the head of a great school be generously rewarded? Why should salaries be divorced from evidence of effectiveness (including evidence that one's students are actually learning what one is teaching them)? Why should anyone be guaranteed permanent employment without regard to his or her performance? How can we expect school principals to be held accountable for results if they cannot decide whom to employ in their schools or how much to pay them?

9. The classroom must be a sanctuary for serious teaching and learning of essential academic skills and knowledge. That means all available resources – time, people, money – must be focused on what happens in that classroom. More of the education dollar should find its way into the classroom. Distractions and di

versions must cease. Desirable-but-secondary missions must be relegated to other times and places. Impediments to order and discipline must be erased. And the plagues and temptations of modern life must be kept far from the classroom door. Nothing must be allowed to interfere with the ability of a knowledgeable teacher to impart solid content to youngsters who are ready and willing to learn it.

10. Parents, parents, parents. . . and other caring adults. It is a fact that great schools can work miracles with children from miserable homes and awful neighborhoods. But it is also a fact that attentive parents (and extended families, friends, etc.) are an irreplaceable asset. If they read and talk to their children and help them with their homework, schools are far better able to do their part. If good character is taught at home (and in religious institutions), the schools can concentrate on what they do best: conveying academic knowledge and skills.

Hope for the Next American Century

Good things are already happening here and there. Most of the reforms on our list can be seen operating someplace in America today. Charter schools are proliferating. Privately managed public schools have long waiting lists. Choices are spreading. Standards are being written and rewritten. The changes we advocate are beginning, and we expect them to spread because they make sense and because they serve children well. But they are still exceptions, fleas on the elephant's back. The elephant still has most of the power. And that, above all, is what must change during the next fifteen years in ways that were unimaginable during the past fifteen. We must never again assume that the education system will respond to good advice. It will change only when power relationships change, particularly when all parents gain the power to decide where their children go to school.

Such changes are wrenching. No monopoly welcomes competition. No stodgy enterprise begs to be reformed. Resistance must be expected. Some pain must be tolerated. Consider the plight of Detroit's automakers in the 1980's. At about the same time the Excellence Commission was urging major changes on U.S. schools, the worldwide auto market was forcing them upon America's "big three" car manufacturers. Customers didn't want to buy expensive, gas-guzzling vehicles with doors that didn't fit. So they turned to reliable, inexpensive Asian and European imports. Detroit suffered mightily from the competition. Then it made the changes that it needed to make. Some of them were painful indeed. They entailed radical changes in job expectations, huge reductions in middle management and fundamental shifts in manufacturing processes and corporate cultures. The auto industry would not have chosen to take this path, but it was compelled to change or disappear.

Still, resistance to structural changes and power shifts in education must be expected. Every recommendation we have made will be fought by the current system, whose spokesmen will claim that every suggested reform constitutes an attack on public education. They will be wrong. What truly threatens public education is clinging to an ineffective status quo. What will save it are educators, parents and other citizens who insist on reinvigorating and reinventing it.

The stakes could not be higher. What is at stake—and what is at risk—is America's ability to provide all its daughters and sons with necessary skills and knowledge, with environments for learning that are safe for children and teachers, with schools in which every teacher is excellent and learning is central. What is at stake is parents' confidence that their children's future will be bright thanks to the excellent education that they are getting; taxpayers' confidence that the money they are spending on public education is well spent; employers' confidence that the typical graduate of the typical U.S. high school will be ready for the workplace; and our citizens' confidence that American education is among the best in the world.

But even more is at stake than our future prosperity. Despite this country's mostly admirable utilitarianism when it comes to education, good education is not just about readiness for the practical challenges of life. It is also about liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It is about preparation for moral, ethical and civic challenges, for participation in a vibrant culture, for informed engagement in one's community, and for a richer quality of life for oneself and one's family. Test scores are important. But so, too, are standards and excellence in our society. The decisions we make about education are really decisions about the kind of country we want to be; the sort of society in which we want to raise our children; the future we want them to have; and even—and perhaps especially—about the content of their character and the architecture of their souls. In the last decade of this American Century, we must not be content with anything less than the best for all our children.

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* Mr. Marshall dissents from that portion of recommendation #2 that would have public dollars flow to private and parochial schools on the same basis.